

Urban newspapers cover the big weather failure to the satisfaction, I suppose, of their city subscribers. In the outposts victimized by drouth, printed words describing the disaster are superficial. Dehydrated bodies of starved lambs abandoned by hungry ewes on the feed ground and the profiles of hairball calves trailing along behind the herd stealing milk are difficult pictures to paint in ink, especially for a reporter raised in the city.

Unlike the Richter scale that rates earthquakes, drouths haven't an index. The only base is the county agent's report: "weather conditions are poor for planting and deficient for subsoil moisture," or a broader definition, "all areas in the state are in need of additional deep soil moisture."

Livestock bankers come closer to evaluating dry spells than anyone around town except the herders. Shortgrass jugkeepers once had the sharpest aim of any financial marksmen in the country to target weather disasters. Before the massive banking systems moved in from out of state to seize the deposits to loan elsewhere, the local banks were the best allies ranchers and farmers ever knew, and many existing small jugs still are to this day.

Government programs further confirm the mystery of drouths to outsiders. Last year's disaster program covered 18 states. Flood and drouth victims shared in a five million dollar pot big enough to cover the losses west of San Angelo

and probably not enough to remove the bullfrogs from under the kitchen sinks in the high-water districts. Percentage of grazing conditions determined payment for the drylanders, but no one knew to what degree you had to be out of grass to be paid.

Ranchers who sold out prior to application were penalized. I'd have loved to have known whether folks flooded on the Mississippi Delta received help to build an ark, or were paid according to the height of the water marks in their living rooms. But I don't smart off around government offices. In particular, government offices where our fate hangs on a thread one strand thinner than a spider's web and you expect any moment to hear Gabriel's horn over the Musak.

Keeping books on drouths out on the range, like all our home systems, is simple. All across the shortgrass country feed bills have been above normal for 10 years. After hearing and reading over and over the common complaint by ranchers of how much a new pickup costs, I hit upon tallying my drouth losses on how many new pickups I've fed up since I bought my last one in 1992. The count reached 14 custom cabs or 11 crew cabs the first of March of this year. My projections show if winter lasts until the first of August, I'll have invested a sizable fleet in number two corn and 20 percent range cubes.

Younger ranchers don't have to use my system. They can substitute semesters of college tuition, rooms of new

furniture, extra bathrooms for the home, ocean cruises to the Bahamas, years of teachers' salaries (man or wife), or percentage of inherited income to calculate their losses. Side income for the young may differ, also, by expanding Mother's Day to include "Mom's" certificate of deposit as surety on the notes at the bank, bounty hunting for smugglers on the Mexican border, tearing up part of the flooring in the ranch house to make a mushroom garden, and sharpening tools for shearing crews (nights only).

Again, recordkeeping need not be complicated. Progress can be jotted down in out of date savings account books. Notching a stick like the Indians used to count buffalo hunts is a good way to keep a livestock inventory. Just don't pull the stick out at a tax audit, or at the bank, because drouth ranchers are under enough suspicion without extra symptoms of incompetence.

In all these years, the only newspaper to ever call the ranch was the *Livestock Weekly*, and they weren't calling for my opinion on the drouth, but were looking for an article lost in the mail. Takes a plenty savvy scribe to interview the herders out here in good or bad years. By the time all the woes are expounded upon and anti-coyote plugs slipped in, no space is left to share the advantages of being a herder.

But perhaps the reason we are so hard to reach is because we are all waiting for one more glorious spring followed by a beautiful fall when the old country blossoms

into a verdant force, making lambs and calves break into a run at the slightest provocation. Be hard for anyone to see why that's worth waiting for 10 years at a span.